

KGB Lets 'Nightline' Peek at

By Bill Carter
New York Times

New York

Until about a month ago, ABC News was convinced it had a chance to provide some stunning and exclusive information about the greatest unresolved story of the 20th century: the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Thanks to a commitment from

Vadim V. Bakatin, the new chairman of the Soviet secret police, the KGB, ABC was to have been granted access to the secret KGB file on Lee Harvey Oswald.

But circumstances changed quickly, and tomorrow night, when the ABC News program "Nightline" presents a special broadcast about the KGB's Oswald file, it will be, in the words of the program's executive producer,

Tom Bettag, "intriguing but clearly not conclusive."

JFK Died 28 Years Ago

What ABC has, Bettag said, are "the headlines from the file," including what he called the overall Soviet conclusions about Oswald, who lived in the U.S.S.R. for 2½ years before returning to the United States and becoming, the Warren Commission said, the man who

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 1991

Secret Files on Oswald

shot President Kennedy in Dallas 28 years ago tomorrow.

The KGB conclusions, Bettag said, are that Oswald was "not capable of having been an American agent and not a threat to anybody." He added, "They clearly question whether he was capable of acting alone in the assassination, and their conclusion is that he simply wasn't capable of doing it."

All of these conclusions would have been bolstered by an extensive examination of the file. But the early agreement with Bakatin unraveled, for reasons that seem to range from the sudden resistance of the KGB bureaucracy to Bakatin's reluctance to decide which of two aggressive suitors, ABC and CNN, should have access to the file.

Bettag said ABC's access had been carefully established through months of contact with Bakatin, beginning in the days after the Soviet coup failed in August. Bakatin established a cordial relationship with a "Nightline" reporter, Forrest Sawyer, who stayed in Moscow for many weeks, trying to persuade Bakatin to open the Oswald file to ABC.

File Stashed Away

Finally, in late September, Bakatin assented, on the condition that ABC devote a special broadcast to the Oswald file. Sawyer was then allowed inside KGB headquarters and was taken to the room where the Oswald file has been kept "under lock and key." Bettag said, "in a musty room, on pieces of paper squirreled away in cardboard folders."

Sawyer also discussed the file



Lee Harvey Oswald: KGB felt that he wasn't capable of acting alone in killing JFK

the room where he courted his future wife, Marina, even giving him a gun and monitoring his shooting ability at a firing range.

"Clearly we felt we had hit the mother lode," Bettag said. ABC made plans to document all the details contained in the full file.

But before that could happen, "things changed suddenly," Bettag said. "The bureaucracy suddenly seemed to be striking back." He said veteran KGB officials started asking Bakatin how he could be giving access to such sensitive material to American journalists before it was even available to Soviet journalists.

The bulk of "Nightline" tomorrow night will be devoted to a discussion in which the anchor, Ted Koppel, asks Sawyer what he saw of the file and the conclusions he was told the KGB had reached.

Bettag said the program will be more impressionistic than detailed and probably will not answer any of the lingering questions about the assassination. "It comes out saying: Boy, here's another damn twist in this story," Bettag said.

with its KGB case officer, who outlined the broad conclusions the KGB reached about Oswald. Then on October 5, ABC was allowed to bring a camera into the room.

Bettag said the file was 10 inches thick. He said it showed that Soviet officials had deep suspicions about the ex-Marine who claimed to be a defector and kept him under constant surveillance, planting agents to work beside him at a factory in Minsk, bugging